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Organizing SOCOM for Cross Functional and Geographic Area Operations in the Global
War on Terrorism

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the
requirements Department of the Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by
the Naval War College, Department of the Navy.

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ABSTRACT

While SOCOM has started to transform its organization, the nature of the terrorist threat requires something more. In order to defeat and deny/diminish the terrorist threat across geographic and functional areas of responsibility, SOCOM needs two entirely different organizations. One needs to operate in the very same seams as the terrorists, while the second needs to smooth and prevent these seams. The first would plan, direct, and execute direct-action type operations designed to defeat the threat. The second would plan, direct, and execute long-term non-kinetic operations such as information operations (IO), psychological operations (PSYOPS), unconventional warfare (UW), and foreign internal defense (FID) to deny/diminish the threat. The first would be a small, cellular interagency organization composed of personnel on loan for an extended period. The second would be a much larger organization, working across geographic boundaries to integrate IO, PSYOPS, UW, and FID into the geographic combatant commander's (GCC) theater security cooperation plans to shape and prevent future battlefields.

INTRODUCTION

The nature of this war does not lend to an easily identifiable battlefield. When we call it global, we do not just mean geographically. The enemy is operating in the seams of our information structure, our financial institutions, and our international political system.¹

General Bryan D. Brown

Commander, United States Special Operations Command

The National Strategy for Combating Terrorism outlines four objectives in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT): defeat terrorists and their organizations; deny sponsorship, support, and sanctuary to terrorists; diminish the underlying conditions those terrorists seek to exploit; defend U.S. citizen's interest at home, and abroad.² In the weeks after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the Secretary of Defense tasked Special Operations Command (SOCOM) to lead the military effort in this war.³ SOCOM's role increased further in January 2003, when the Secretary of Defense announced SOCOM would operate as both a supported and supporting command.⁴

While SOCOM has started to transform its organization, the nature of the terrorist threat requires something more.⁵ In order to defeat and deny/diminish the terrorist threat across geographic and functional areas of responsibility, SOCOM needs two entirely different organizations. One needs to operate in the very same seams as the terrorists, while the second needs to smooth and prevent these seams. The first would plan, direct, and execute direct-action type operations designed to defeat the threat. The second would plan, direct, and execute long-term non-kinetic operations such as information operations (IO), psychological operations (PSYOPS), unconventional warfare (UW), and foreign internal defense (FID) to deny/diminish the threat. The first would be a small, cellular interagency organization composed of personnel on loan for an extended period. The second would be a much larger organization, working across geographic boundaries to integrate IO, PSYOPS,

UW, and FID into the geographic combatant commander's (GCC) theater security cooperation plans to shape and prevent future battlefields.

BACKGROUND

SOCOM, created in 1986 under the Cohen-Nunn Amendment to the Department of Defense Authorization Act, has the authorities of both a service component and a combatant commander, to include a separate budget and resource allocation. Congress created SOCOM to prevent the "ad hoc" use of special operations forces (SOF) and to ensure there was an institutional memory of past lessons learned. A separate command also ensured joint interoperability between SOF from the different services. While the law that established SOCOM has always included the authority for SOCOM to "exercise command of selected special operation missions," SOCOM's organizational structure facilitated its mission to provide, train and equip forces, not the missions of a functional or combatant commander.⁶ Command of SOF in combat was usually under one of the GCCs, who then reported up the chain to the Secretary of Defense and the President. This type of command and control arrangement made it difficult for SOF to exercise their full capabilities in operations leading up to September 11.⁷

SOCOM has nine core tasks, but counterterrorism (CT) is the most important according to the *SOF Posture Statement 2003-2004*.⁸ Within the CT task, SOF executes several types of operations. Each is distinct in the time required for success as well as the methods employed. Joint Publication 3-05, *Doctrine for Joint Special Operations*, defines counterterrorism as the following:

Those operations that include the offensive measures taken to prevent, deter, preempt, and respond to terrorism. SOF's role and additive capability is to conduct offensive measures within DOD's overall combating terrorism efforts. SOF conduct CT missions as special operations by covert,

clandestine, or low visibility means. SOF's activities within CT include, but are not limited to, intelligence operations, attacks against terrorist networks and infrastructures, hostage rescue, recovery of sensitive material from terrorist networks, and non-kinetic activities aimed at the ideologies or motivations that spawn terrorism.⁹

Non-kinetic activities include, but are not limited to PSYOPS, IO, CA, UW, and FID. Joint Publication 3-05 states PSYOP alters the target audiences attitude and behavior. The first draft revision of Joint Publication 3-0 categorizes PSYOP as subset of IO, with IO designed to "influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp adversarial human and automated decision making while protecting our own."¹⁰ FID helps a friendly government prevent subversion, lawlessness, and insurgency.¹¹ UW deals with assisting indigenous or paramilitary forces in performing guerilla warfare, subversion, sabotage, and intelligence activities.¹²

PSYOP, CA, UW, and FID are usually long-term operations. These types of operations take time to grow and ripen. In lieu of a specific joint task force tasking, SOF forces can conduct non-kinetic attacks while doing Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET). JCETs are not combat operations. It is SOF training conducted in foreign countries, which not only provides real world training for the SOF personnel, but training for the host country as well.

Even though these types of missions take time to pay off, they are an important tool for shaping a region. First, they "place our seasoned professional SOF face-to-face with indigenous personnel. This physical and professional closeness to our foreign military counterparts can pay real benefits as the CINC works to shape his AOR by working with those counterparts."¹³ Second, getting SOF personnel in the field provides ground truth intelligence that is difficult to obtain any other way. Third, SOF are the eyes and ears in the field for the GCC, what some have called the "Global Scouts."¹⁴ Unfortunately, SOF's

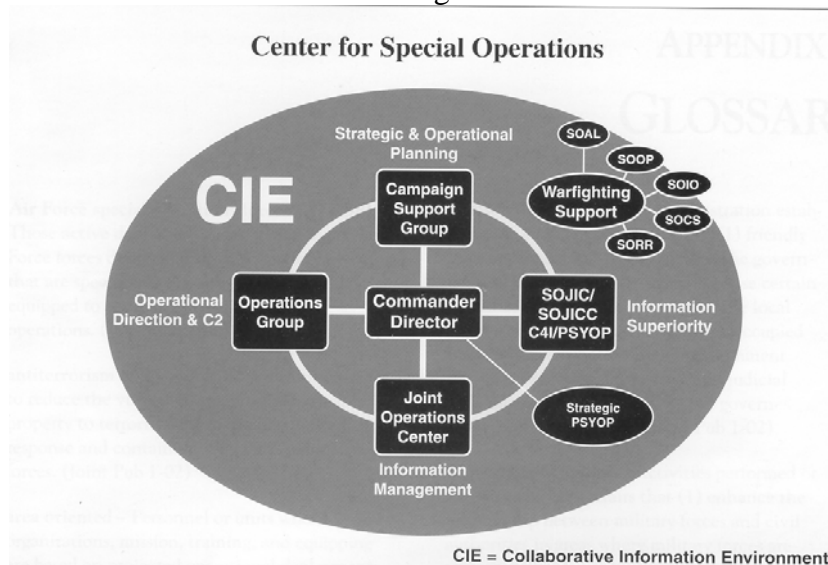
efforts during JCETs are not fully integrated into the GCC's theater security cooperation plan (TSCP) because of a lack of coordination and prioritization in the planning process.¹⁵

While the non-kinetic attacks are usually a long-term effort, the direct-action attacks are usually short and precise. SOCOM maintains the ability to conduct these types of counterterrorism operations covertly, clandestinely, or as low visibility operations. Covert operations seek to conceal the identity of the sponsor, while a clandestine operation merely seeks to conceal the operation itself.¹⁶ This covert capability crosses into the functional area of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).¹⁷ There is no specific law providing the CIA with these powers; instead, the precedence has developed under the provision that the CIA is to perform other duties as directed by the National Security Council.¹⁸ Even then, a Presidential Finding is required to conduct such activities, whether it is by the CIA or the Department of Defense.¹⁹

SOCOM also now has the authority to fund paramilitary forces.²⁰ The capability is limited to \$25 million, but without integrated operations between the CIA and SOCOM, the warlords could double dip into the coffer, or two competing paramilitary forces could receive funding from the United States.²¹ SOCOM's new authority to fund paramilitary forces should prevent delays like those experienced in Afghanistan where SOF forces had to wait for CIA personnel to bribe the local warlords, but it could create problems as noted above. The 9/11 Commission Report went so far as to recommend that the responsibility of conducting paramilitary operations should shift to the Department of Defense, based on the poor performance of the CIA paramilitary capabilities leading up to America's intervention in Afghanistan and a so-called redundancy in capabilities.²² Congress further noted that the "CIA brings to the mix agility and speed. Military brings lethality."²³

Overall, SOCOM is operating at opposite ends of the spectrum based on time and methods. It is also crossing into the functional area of the CIA and the geographic area of the GCCs. The direct-action, defeat type operations are usually short-term and will probably be covert. Based upon their importance, it is not always feasible to integrate them directly into the GCC plans. The IO, PSYOPS, UW, and FID missions are long-term efforts, which may be covert or overt depending on the regional concerns. Integration of the long-term missions into the each combatant commander's TSCP would ensure unity of effort and economy of force.

Figure 1²⁴



To integrate across these functional and geographic areas of responsibility, SOCOM created the Center for Special Operations (CSO), shown in Figure 1. The CSO is a “joint and interagency directorate that has responsibility for all war on terrorism-related operational issues.”²⁵ The CSO is free from administrative functions, so its sole focus is planning and executing CT operations. The CSO also reviews global strategies and develops courses of action against selected targets. Key to integrating the multiple agencies involved in the

GWOT is a web-based collaborative-planning environment designed to link planners and decision makers across the globe. In addition to the web-based collaborative planning environment, SOCOM also created an Interagency Executive Council to provide a medium for feedback and cross flow between the different agencies involved. Another component is the Special Operations Joint Interagency Collaboration Center (SOJICC). SOJICC provides operational intelligence specifically for SOF.²⁶ The Counterterrorism Campaign Support Group is another interagency group, with members from Department of State, Treasury, and Justice working CT at the operational level.²⁷ Overall, SOCOM has over 100 agency representatives working GWOT issues.²⁸ Eventually, SOCOM desires to have a standing joint task force headquarters in place.²⁹ While the new organization is definitely a step in the right direction, the nature of the new terrorist threat and the differences between the CT operations required to defeat, vis-à-vis deny/diminish, the terrorist threat is best performed by two different organizations.

NATURE OF THE TERRORIST THREAT

The nature of the terrorist threat and the risks associated with it changed dramatically after September 11. Terrorist groups like Al Qaeda are not content with just regional influence. Their leaders have global ambitions driven by the common ideology of radical Islam.³⁰ While united in beliefs, they do not have a hierarchal structure. Instead, they maintain loosely knit cellular groups that can operate with or without outside direction. When they do communicate, it is not via normal channels, but rather through personal messengers or through simple but effective code words in public messages. Finally, while they operate across the globe, sanctuaries help them to breed, train, and strengthen their organizations.

Russell Howard described this new terrorist threat as “...transnational, borderless, and prosecuted by non-state actors, and it is very, very, dangerous.”³¹ The decentralized nature of the threat makes targeting direct-action counterterrorist attacks extremely difficult, mostly because of the difficulty in collecting, analyzing, and delivering actionable intelligence.³² Not only is the new terrorist threat difficult to locate and eliminate, it is here to stay. The recent National Intelligence Council 2020 report stated, “the key factors that spawned international terrorism show no signs of abating over the next 15 years.”³³ Many have gone so far as to categorize this new form of terrorism as a global insurgency.³⁴

The glue that binds this threat together is its ideological and religious beliefs. The ideological nature of the conflict is similar to that of the Cold War. As in the Cold War, when some such as George Kennan argued that the people themselves were not permanent enemies, the Islamic people themselves are not the enemy. The real struggle is for the hearts and minds of the Islamic people.³⁵ Non-kinetic attacks are ideal for waging this type of war. In some cases, direct-action type operations may very well hurt the long-term effort.³⁶

While winning the hearts and minds of the Islamic world will help deny/diminish the terrorist threat, there is still a need to defeat those organizations that pose an immediate threat before they launch any attacks. These preemptive attacks usually involve targeting the leadership of the organization. These small victories help continue support for the long-term global war and they can prevent some of the more charismatic leaders from gaining additional support based on their exploits. With the high demand/low density of SOF and the inability to have forces forward deployed everywhere, the first choice to conduct these offensive operations should be the countries themselves.³⁷ FID operations are an excellent

way to strengthen a country's military capability so that it can act effectively on its own. Excellent examples of this are continuing operations in the Philippines and Colombia.

While we can act to strengthen the military capabilities of friendly governments, some governments cannot overtly ask for American help based on the fear of a backlash from the local population.³⁸ A good example of this is Pakistan. In such cases, SOCOM needs the capability to conduct CT operations covertly. In other countries, such as Djibouti, or in the case of failed states like Somalia, the governments are just not capable of policing their entire country. Denying sanctuaries in these countries prevents the terrorists from growing and planning large-scale operations.³⁹ For example, in Niger, the United States is training an elite counterterrorist unit to defeat any possible terrorist cells seeking refuge in the relatively uninhabited countryside.⁴⁰ In some of the areas totally devoid of government forces, SOCOM could conduct paramilitary operations to defeat the terrorists and prevent the growth of sanctuaries. With the limited number of SOF personnel available, maintaining and creating effective allies through FID and UW significantly enhances SOCOM's ability to deny/diminish the terrorist threat.

Some would argue that the current SOCOM centric-like structure is sufficient to enable CT operations across functional and geographic areas of responsibility. With the terrorists operating in such small groups, a large centric organization is never going to truly think and react faster than a small terrorist cell. With a history of secrecy and compartmentalization, it will also take additional time to integrate the personnel and methodology of the assigned CIA personnel into a larger organization. One large centric organization focused on both defeat and deny/diminish type operations will also run into prioritization problems. With every defeat type operation attempt, the size of the forces for

the deny/diminish operations decreases. The “go Hollywood” type direct-action missions attract more media attention and public support. With all the services fighting for funding, there could be pressure to focus on these short-term solutions, which provide a tangible measure of success in lieu of the long-term, less measurable operations.

While the Center for Special Operations will help reduce the turnaround time of critical intelligence, thereby allowing more accurate and timely operations to defeat terrorists, this is not the optimum path in the longer struggle to deny/diminish the threat. With SOCOM providing the overarching plan, the Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs) under each combatant commander have the regional expertise best suited to integrate and synchronize the overall non-kinetic attacks into the TSCPs.

Others would argue that a geographic approach based on the current GCC concept is sufficient. The trans-national nature of the threat makes coordination between the different GCCs paramount. A global effort without one commander would violate the idea of unity of command, thereby increasing the chance each GCC would adopt a different or conflicting strategy. In addition, face-to-face coordination is always more effective than e-mail, chat, web-based collaborative planning, or a VTC. The true answers come after the meetings and briefings when the parties meet to ensure the other fully understands their role. With no central hub for the military operations of all the GCCs, face-to-face coordination would be severely limited.

A geographic approach also places undue strain on the CIA resources since they would have to support multiple GCCs. The same could be said for the TSOC staffs. It would be highly inefficient to expand the TSOCs so that they could build standing task forces exclusively dedicated to CT operations in their regions. Finally, like the idea the

Air Force has developed that airpower is best controlled by those who understand air power, SOF CT operations are best controlled by SOF. There have been too many instances where conventional commanders were reluctant to use SOF based on their personal bias or misconceptions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to defeat and deny/diminish the terrorist threat across geographic and functional areas of responsibility, SOCOM needs two entirely different organizations. The first is a small, cellular interagency organization composed of personnel on loan for an extended period from agencies such as the CIA, Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), and Department of Justice (DOJ).⁴¹ Their mission is to plan, direct, and execute immediate, direct-action type operations to defeat the terrorists and their infrastructure.

These types of operations rely heavily on intelligence. The intelligence needs to be actionable, yet it could come from anywhere around the globe. Consequently, the CIA and other intelligence gathering agencies play an integral part in supporting this organization. The military may have more resources, but it does not have the training and experience to field the type of assets required to gather the amount and type of human intelligence (HUMINT) required. The CIA is in a much better position to provide HUMINT, despite their cutbacks prior to September 11. Coupling the lethality and resources of SOCOM with the intelligence gathering capability of the CIA alleviates many of the problems that prevented a preemptive strike on Al Qaeda before September 11. Another key agency partner in the cellular organization needs to be the Department of Justice. Defeating the terrorists does not always mean they are killed. In many cases, there is significant intelligence and PSYOP value gained by capturing and prosecuting terrorists.

To help ensure unity of effort between each agency and SOCOM, the supporting agency personnel (CIA, DIA, DOJ, etc.) need to be on loan for an extended period of at least three years. The extended period of assignment helps ensure each specialists' maximum potential by truly making them part of the organization. The cellular nature of the organization also helps minimize friction between SOCOM and the other agencies by not providing a specific branch within the organization to finger point at when there are mistakes or failures.

Despite the strategic importance of the missions, SOF still needs the ability to operate with some flexibility in the field. Ideally, SOCOM identifies specific targets and establishes rules of engagement for each terrorist target in advance. With the ground rules set in advance, a cellular organization can immediately engage on any actionable intelligence that emerges with less worry of having the leadership around to give the plan approval. A vertically structured organization hampers this type of flexibility. SOF in the field also need direct access to the intelligence personnel providing the information and a short chain of command for mission taskings. The shooter in the field should talk directly with the organization's commander, who in turn has access to the SOCOM commander. Anything longer in these types of missions reduces the probability of success when the plan is adjusted in the field due to fog and friction. A cellular organization is the ideal way to develop the trust between the commander and the forces in the field to allow such a short chain of command. It also develops the trust necessary between the shooter and the on-loan agency personnel. Much like the SOF truth that "competent SOF cannot be created after emergencies occur," the organization needed to defeat terrorists cannot go into the field without having rehearsed and trained together regularly, just like SOF does for any other

mission.⁴² This is especially true when you are dealing with covert, high risk, high pay off missions.

While the command and control needs to be short and flexible, it has to have enough weight to ensure a timely response by supporting forces. A small cellular organization will rely heavily on GCCs to provide protection, logistics, and mobility/maneuver without the GCC or supporting agency necessarily knowing the full details of the mission. Protection is required since the cellular organization will not have a large reserve of forces. Logistics are required since the cellular organization may have to operate anywhere in the world. Mobility/maneuver is required to engage the terrorists before they can disperse and blend back into their surroundings. Only with sufficient leadership horsepower can the organization gather the necessary support in a timely manner.

While the terrorists seek to remain compartmentalized, SOCOM's cellular organization should leverage its technological advantages to link the SOF in the field with their compatriots sitting at their desk doing the analysis and ciphering. SOCOM can also link the TSOCs as additional cells if needed. The TSOCs play a vital role in supporting the cellular organization by providing forward presence and regional expertise. The TSOC's regional expertise is crucial for planning and developing short notice plans. The forward deployed forces of a TSOC provide additional mobility to the organization for those instances when the SOF assigned to the cellular organization do not have adequate time to deploy and execute the mission themselves.

The cellular organization is a fusion of operations, intelligence, and interagency operations into a single entity, like the Center for Special Operations, but on a much smaller scale. With so many layers and over 100 interagency personnel, the current Center for

Special Operations is too large an organization to execute covert direct-action missions. The larger the organization, the less chance there is for secrecy and deniability. If SOCOM compartmentalizes certain operations, the cross flow of information will be reduced. An organization seeking to hunt down and defeat terrorists one by one needs fewer personnel so that it can operate in the very same seams as the terrorists. In addition, by creating a separate cellular organization to defeat the terrorist threat, SOCOM has more freedom to plan and execute the long-term deny/diminish operations.

While the cellular organization works in the same seams as the terrorists, the organization to deny/diminish the terrorist threat works to close and smooth those seams. The deny/diminish organization works across geographic boundaries to integrate IO, PSYOPS, UW, and FID into the each GCC's TSCP. By shaping the battlefield, SOCOM can deny terrorist sanctuaries and diminish the conditions that garner support for the terrorists. The first step in accomplishing these operations is designing an overall campaign plan for the non-kinetic attacks. Without a long-term campaign plan, SOCOM will not be able to synchronize its efforts with those of the GCCs, the Department of State, the CIA, and other agencies. The large, interagency structure of the current Center for Special Operations would make an ideal place to build this campaign plan.

An overall campaign plan is also critical so that SOCOM can adequately train personnel for future missions. Given the SOF truth that "SOF cannot be mass produced," SOCOM needs a method to plan what type of SOF personnel it needs 2-3 years from now.⁴³ For example, if SOCOM plans to perform extensive UW and FID operations in the Pacific Rim, the SOF forces needed for that come at the expense of other operations. An overall campaign plan will allow SOCOM to prioritize and plan for its future operations. In addition

to future operations, a campaign plan would allow SOCOM to at least plan for and execute some JCETs. Not only do JCETs help shape the battlefield for the GCCs, they also allow SOF to gather information in countries where they may have to conduct actual CT operations.⁴⁴

While the current Center for Special Operations has all the pieces to plan and direct long-term CT operations, it needs more than a web-based planning system to integrate its efforts with those of the GCCs and other agencies. With SOCOM directing the global plan, the TSOCs now become the LNOs for each AOR who must inform and educate the GCCs. One way to increase the capabilities of these TSOCs is through increased regional expertise on the TSOC staffs. Just as linguistic and regional expertise increase SOF capabilities in the field, a system needs to be implemented which provides the same for SOF staff officers assigned to TSOCs. The expertise could be injected during intermediate developmental education (IDE), senior developmental education (SDE), or by attending the Joint Special Operations University prior to a SOF staff assignment. SOCOM merely needs to extend its support and reliance on regional expertise in the field to include those on the TSOC staffs as well.

CONCLUSION

In the past SOCOM has strived to integrate SOF into conventional operations. In doing so, the conventional forces did not need to understand how SOF operated; rather just that SOF would be in a certain area completing a specific objective. It is imperative that SOCOM now educate the GCCs and other agencies about the importance and methodology of SOF operations in the GWOT. The small cellular organization needs to fuse intelligence and operations into a small interagency organization, which can operate within the same

seams as the terrorists. The larger deny/diminish organization needs to provide the overarching campaign plan for SOF's role in the GWOT. SOCOM's plan in turn needs to be integrated into each GCC's TSCP.

While SOF are a key player in defeating terrorist organizations, they need to resist the temptation to go too far in trying to defeat every terrorist organization themselves. For example, during the hot wash following an exercise where I was tasked to provide forward area refueling to Army helicopters, I requested that my aircraft's landing be conducted under blacked out conditions, just like the refueling operations. The Army pilot in front of me turned around and said, "We don't care how we get the gas, as long as we get it." I instantly realized that I did not have to go above and beyond to foster completion of the mission as a whole; I had a specific role to play in the overall concept of operations, and anything beyond that just made the operation more difficult. In the GWOT, SOF does not always have to go above and beyond by trying to hunt down and kill every terrorist. Only a few SOF units need to perform those operations, while the rest can conduct the less glamorous, but highly important deny/diminish type operations. *The Washington Post* recently described just such a debate going on in the Department of Defense concerning the priority between defeat and deny/diminish types of operations in the GWOT.⁴⁵

By creating a separate cellular organization to defeat the terrorist threat, SOCOM has more freedom to plan and execute the long-term deny/diminish operations. Deputy Secretary of Defense Wolfowitz and General Brown highlighted the importance of the deny/diminish types of operations during the House Armed Services Committee on August 10, 2004.⁴⁶ Despite this acknowledgement, SOCOM is actually looking at pulling away from some of these missions and focusing more on the defeat type operations.⁴⁷ The need for separate

organization is similar to the split between plans and operations at the operational level. In this case, the direction-action missions are the current operations while the non-kinetic attacks are the plans helping reduce uncertainty in the future by preparing the battlefield now.

Notes

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- ⁵ The Joint Special Operations University identified this topic for further research in 2004. My initial thoughts and ideas on the issue stemmed from phone calls and e-mails with the originator of the topic request, Mr. Terrance G. Moran, Senior Policy Analyst with Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC).
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- ³⁰ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 363.
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- ³⁴ Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, *The Age of Sacred Terror* (New York: Random House 2003), 453.
- ³⁵ Rob de Wijk, "The Limits of Military Power" in *Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Understanding the New Security Environment*, ed. Russell D. Howard and Reid L. Sawyer (Guilford: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 489.
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- ³⁷ Ibid, 24.
- ³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid, 37.

⁴⁰ STRATFOR, “Africa: The Quiet U.S. Front in the War on Terrorism,” 23 September 2004, <available from <http://www.stratfor.com/index.php>> [7 January 2005].

⁴¹ Recommendations for a cellular CT organization are not new. For example, see Steven Sloan’s *Beating International Terrorism* from 1986.

⁴² Special Operations Command, 30.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Meyer, 60.

⁴⁵ Gregory L. Vistica, “Military Split On How To Use Special Forces in Terror War,” *The Washington Post*, 5 January 2004 , section A, p. 1.

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